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**“Politics as usual?”**  
**Explaining the use of online communication by  
political interest groups in Switzerland**

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## **“Politics as usual?”**

# **Explaining the Use of Online Communication by Political Interest Groups in Switzerland**

### **Abstract**

This paper tries to explain the use of different online communication tools by political interest groups in Switzerland. Theoretically, the different online instruments employed are conceptualized as a group's (online) communication repertoire. This theoretical framework helps to highlight the fact that the instruments a political interest group is using are dependent on characteristic factors either inside or outside of a given organization. The adoption of different online communication tools is hypothesized to be influenced by the media and political environment an interest group is active in, as well as its organizational capacities and incentives. Survey data from 887 politically active interest groups in Switzerland is used to test these hypotheses. Subsequent logit regression models show that the results can best be summarized as “politics as usual” – there is only little support for the assumption that online communication is rather used by smaller, financially weak, fringe organizations.

**Keywords:** Technology adoption and use, interest groups, Switzerland, internet, online communication

## Introduction

Since the emergence of the internet as a commonly available mean of communication in Western democracies almost 20 years ago, its role and relevance for political organizations has been intensely discussed. The assessment of the relevance of the internet in political communication has oscillated between journalistic hype and academic scepticism (Norris & Curtice, 2008, p. 3), with effects of the internet on the political world classified as anything from an “overthrow of everything” (Trippi, 2005) to “politics as usual” (Gibson & Ward, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). It thus seems important to try to contribute to the subsequently emerging questions of “what will change, what will not, and why” (Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, & Norris, 2004, p. 94) through the diffusion of online communication among political organizations by adding further empirical research to the discussion. The main research question to be investigated in this paper is the use of new technologies by political interest groups in Switzerland, both independently and in relation to more established activities or instruments available to political organizations. These questions will be tackled by analysing data from a large-n-study on political interest groups in Switzerland<sup>1</sup>. After briefly outlining the research questions in greater detail, defining political interest groups and discussing a theoretical conceptual design trying to explain the online activities of political organizations, the remaining parts of this paper are dedicated to the empirical analysis and interpretation of the data mentioned above.

## Research question

Political interest groups, as a distinctive type of political organizations, have a number of communication instruments available to pursue their organizational goals. Focusing only on what can be termed external communication in the remaining parts of this paper the range of instruments and activities related to communication spans the sending out of press releases, direct contact with journalists or politicians, issuing informative material and more novel forms such as operating or maintaining a website, sending out a newsletter by email, activities social networks sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) or operating and maintaining a Twitter account – to name but a few. The instruments an interest group is able to employ can be defined as its repertoire. Repertoires of collective action originate from the research of social movement organizations (Tilly, 1995), but can also fruitfully be transferred to the study of other political organizations (Kriesi, Bernhard, & Hänggli, 2009; Kriesi, Tresch, & Jochum, 2007), such as interest groups. The term *communication repertoire* (Bernhard, 2012, p. 84; Kriesi et al., 2009, p. 350), however, should not be limited to political campaigns but could be applied to collective action in the day-to-day routine of political organizations as well.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on data from the NCCR Democracy research project *Mediatization of political interest groups* in Germany and Switzerland and is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). In the following, only data from Switzerland are used.

Repertoires are routines and as such “fairly institutionalized” (Kriesi et al., 2009, p. 350), but also “subject to change as new channels become available thanks to technological change” (Kriesi et al., 2009, p. 350). Thus, online communication (Rolfe, 2005; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010) can be integrated into the communication repertoire of political organizations. These *online communication repertoires* are at the heart of this paper. The concept of repertoire further holds that the “organizational form and tactics of an organization, such as the way it makes decisions, appeals to its supporters, and campaigns, have elective affinities with its broader goals” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 285). The concept of repertoire is helpful in tracing the specific form of action to organizational characteristics of a given (political) organization and in highlighting the historical and political circumstances, under which these forms of action take place: “Values shape repertoires of collective action, which in turn shape the kind adoption of organizational forms. Different political organizations adopt different repertoires depending upon their position and goals within a political system.” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 15). The main research question to be investigated in this paper therefore asks:

Which political and organizational characteristics can explain the online communication repertoire employed by different interest groups in Switzerland?

### **Theoretical framework and literature review**

The study of interest groups as a whole remains to be a rather scarcely investigated area of research in political science at large (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008, p. 1103). Essentially, political interest groups as such are occupied with the organization, aggregation articulation and intermediation of societal interests with the aim of influencing public policies (Beyers et al., 2008, p. 1103). Furthermore, interest groups possess a certain organizational structure which excludes broad social movements or waves of public opinion (Eising, 2008, p. 5). They are organizations which are “(normally) *multi-member, politically oriented bodies* of individuals (in this case both citizens and companies as business group members) [emphasis in original].” (Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004, p. 205). The term (political) interest group thus subsumes a variety of different organizations such as pressure groups, trade unions or business associations. The importance of studying how interest groups perceive of and implement (i.e.: *react*) to new ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) is emphasized by the fact that possible changes go hand-in-hand with several other challenges interest groups are confronted with. Processes such as the horizontal and vertical differentiation of the interest groups system, globalisation or Europeanization, result in an increase in the interest groups politically active (Vowe, 2007, pp. 481-484; Willems & von Winter, 2007, pp. 26-33). The fragmentation and growing heterogeneity of societal interests (Jun, 2009, p. 32), caused by individualization and pluralisation, pressurizes the motives for societal engagement. The common denominator of these challenges is their connection to

the importance of communication transmitted by the media, as they are seen as vital agents in reaching, targeting, and mobilising wider audiences (Heldman, 2008, p. 340).

While ICT is a broader label which also encompasses technologies such as mobile phones, the term online communication focuses on the different forms of net-based applications such as email, the World Wide Web (WWW) or internal communication tools like intranet entities (Beck, 2006). The emergence of new technologies can be seen as an “exogenous shock” (Bimber, Stohl, & Flanagin, 2009, p. 85) for political interest groups, “widening the political playing field and accelerating established trends such as the growth of direct action and single-issue politics” (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 34). Hence, protest groups or campaigns, new social movements and looser, network-like organizational patterns seem to profit more from new technologies than traditional collective organizations (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 34). This extension of the horizontal and vertical space a political interest group is active in, results in a growing number of activities and instruments available to them, in order to reach its organizational goals. In short: their communication repertoire is increasing, as their portfolio of strategies, linkages and ways of engaging citizens is expanding through the proliferation of online communication technologies (Bimber et al., 2009, pp. 73-74).

New technologies, however, are not leading to entirely new forms of organizing collective action or new types of organizations, but the relative openness of the internet, the possible combination of personal and impersonal interactions at the same time and its flexibility are unique, distinguishing the internet from previous media (Bimber et al., 2009, pp. 82-83). The emergence of the internet thus leads to increasing variation both internal and external to organizations. While it permits a broader range of interaction and engagement internally, leading to a tendency of greater organizational variety, it could contribute externally toward greater complexity in the organizational environment. Competition among groups facing similar organizational constraints may result in differentiation of interest groups through innovation. However, when collective action goals involve common targets, when political interest groups from different political sectors pursue similar political goals, the organizational forms that groups adopt are likely to cluster in ways that have proven historically successful (Bimber et al., 2009, pp. 83-84; Zorn, Flanagin, & Shoham, 2011). Conversely, there may be considerable change and variation observable in the organizational structure and the online communication repertoire of political organizations: “Many new types of organizations are doing new things in new ways, old organizations are doing old things in old ways, and old organizations are doing new things in new ways” (Bimber et al., 2009, p. 74). The diversification of organizational repertoires and structures could then be considered as a response to a media environment that has become more complex.

The selective implementation and adoption of these “digital network repertoires” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 283) could eventually lead to a blurring of the boundaries between different types of political organizations, such as social movement organizations, political parties, or political interest groups, and may result in “organizational hybridity” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 283). Different organizations are able to switch faster between once established repertoires due to the new communication technologies. The importance of the discussion about these new communication technologies in politics can be credited to the central role of communication in the structuring of political practice. It is known that the introduction of earlier technologies, such as Radio or Television, had “profound implications for the structure of political influence and the nature of public life, and it is reasonable to assume that the Net will have equally strong implications” (Bimber, 1998, p. 134). However, an increase in information, as provided by the internet, does not automatically lead to an increase in political action. While the internet is accelerating processes of issue group formation and action, the structure of political power in the respective countries is changed, but by no means revolutionized or qualitatively transformed (Bimber, 1998, p. 136). It is possible that processes of group-oriented politics will be less coherent and less corresponding to established private or public institutional structures, as outlined above. The actual effects of the internet on politics, however, are limited by the willingness and capacity of citizens to engage in complex political life (see also Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, 1998, p. 136).

To assess the changes that the internet actually has had or is effecting on political organizations, it is helpful to distinguish between intra- and interorganizational change, i.e. change taking place within and between political organizations (Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 28-34). Within organizations, the internet has been seen mainly as a tool to gather additional members and supporters, to increase supporter activity and commitment and to promote internal democracy (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 28). However, the internet’s characteristic as a “pull” technology, where users have to display a certain amount of activity to gather information, restricts recruitment benefits. The substitution of real-world connections to other supporters by rather passive online memberships with limited long-term ties and the little amount of additional participation essentially granted to members of the organization have led to only limited effects on politics (Norris & Curtice, 2008, p. 3; Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 28-31). Similarly, expectations that the internet leads to a process of deinstitutionalization and a flattening of established hierarchies have not been met (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 32). There is some evidence that outsider, oppositional or fringe organizations benefit disproportionately from new ICTs, however. Some studies show major differences between the strategies of radical and more traditional groups in specific sectors (Brainard & Siplon, 2004, p. 141). In an early account of the activities of political interest groups on the internet, Margolis and Resnick (2000, pp. 69-72) acknowledge the advantages of the new

technologies, such as increased informational efficiency and reduced organizational costs, but conclude that the interest groups most likely to benefit are the ones that are already politically active and influential. As the use of the new technologies has become mainstream, established political organizations adapted and have implemented internet strategies in their (communication) repertoire by now. Hence, normalization – “politics as usual” (Bentivegna, 2006; Gibson & Ward, 1998; Gulati & Williams, 2010; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Merry, 2011; Nah & Saxton, 2012; Norris, 2003; Schweitzer, 2008, 2011; Ward & Lusoli, 2003; Ward & Vedel, 2006; Wright, 2012) – is probably the most accurate description of the effects ICTs had on political organizations so far (Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 32-33).

The activity and strategies of political interest groups online can further be explained by the systemic and technological opportunity structures (media environment, political environment) in which the groups operate, the organizational capacity available to groups (staff time, skills, and finance, for example) and the organizational incentives as key factors in implementing ICTs (organizational ideology, target audience, organizational age, organizational status) (Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 35-36). These traits should be treated as independent variables. Furthermore, individual staff of interest groups can be influential in pushing the adoption of internet technologies, often against historical or ideological organizational constraints (Ward & Lusoli, 2003, p. 174). As mentioned above, some organizational forms of political organizations are better suited to adapt to external changes, others are less adept to incorporate new tools, as Ward and Lusoli (2003, p. 175) show for British trade unions. Innovation adaption research suggests that among the most prominent factors why organizations adopt innovations such as new online communication instruments are organizational features, perceived benefits and social pressures (Flanagin, 2000, p. 620). In addition to these key features, ideological orientations, interests, the availability of resources, path dependencies, political competition, the communication strategies and repertoires, as well as the ITC implementation patterns of political interest groups are also significant factors in the process of adopting, configuring, and using new communication technologies for political purposes (Lindner, 2009, p. 251). When comparing online communication to traditional Public Relations instruments, results show that online communication serves primarily as complimentary to other Public Relations instrument and is no replacement (Voss, 2010, p. 305).

### **Model and hypotheses**

The factors discussed above have been shown to be important in explaining the online communication repertoire employed by political interest groups and are thus essential in answering the paper's research question. Consequently, the aim of the following section is to develop a model which takes the systemic and technological opportunity structures (media

environment, political environment) in which political interest groups are active in, the organizational resources available to groups (staff time, skills, and finance) and the organizational incentives (organizational ideology, target audience, organizational age, organizational status) (Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 35-36) into account. These three factors “may hold the key to explaining organizational activity” (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 35). For each of these factors, its hypothesized impact on the online communication repertoire is discussed in the following.

#### *Media and political environment*

With regard to the media environment a political interest group is active in, the role of public broadcasting, the extent of fragmentation of media and the spread of internet technology have been shown to have had an influence on a political organization’s online communication. However, as these variables are identical for all organizations in the sample and therefore have not been measured group per group, the relationship between these traits and the online communication of political interest groups in Switzerland will only be assessed and interpreted on a general, nation-wide level. Consequently, the same restrictions apply for the characteristics of the Swiss political environment. Generally, “we might expect to see greater and more innovative uses of internet technology in countries with relatively fragmented and less trusted media systems, high internet penetration rates, along with decentralized, personalized, and less fixed political systems” (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36).

#### *Organizational capacity*

An organization’s capacity is understood as the extent to which political organizations are able to implement and use online communication tools and consists of resources such as staff time, skills, and finance. For each of these facets, the relationship between the actual resource and the online activity of political groups is positive (Merry, 2011, pp. 121-122; Nah & Saxton, 2012, pp. 306-309; Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36). As novel forms of online communication represent new channels with which interest groups can potentially address target audiences hitherto unreachable, these new forms require time. Even if a website can be set up without sophisticated technical knowledge, the maintenance and management of the organizational contents, update procedures and the related technical issues all require staff time. The more personnel in an organization employed, the higher will be this organization’s probability to use different forms of online communication. The first hypothesis is thus:

Hypothesis 1: Personnel resources in an organization will be positively related with the organization’s online communication repertoire.



The second hypothesis deals with the financial resources available. Online communication is sometimes seen as rather inexpensive and early hopes related to the internet have argued that especially small, financially weak organizations may profit most from the new technologies. But as shown above, this is empirically not the case. Even as online communication may seem comparably low priced, especially in relation to campaign ads or other forms of advertisement, it nevertheless has to be of a certain quality to play an effective role in the fulfilment of organizational goals. Online communication is, against popular belief, not free. The second hypothesis is thus:

Hypothesis 2: Financial resources available in an organization will be positively related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

Size is not only important in relation to the financial means available to an organization, but also in connection with the members or supporters active in an organization. As an organization gets bigger, in terms of members, its visibility is increased and it is more exposed to external constituencies such as the state, the media and the general public (Nah & Saxton, 2012, p. 298). To accommodate these stakeholders' concerns, organizations may in turn expand their online communication repertoire (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). The direction of this hypothesis thus contradicts the assumption that online communication is geared to small organizations with only few members. Rather, "politics as usual" is expected:

Hypothesis 3: The number of individual members of an organization will be positively related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

#### *Organizational incentives*

"While resources are clearly important, organizational incentives are likely to be the key factors [...] in increasing or decreasing the willingness of organizations to use ICTs" (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36). The political orientation of interest groups is one organizational incentive mentioned in the literature. If rather leftist, green organizations with affinities to the participatory, communitarian nature of the web, or rather organizations from the radical right, embracing online communication for the possibility of unaltered freedom of speech, have profited most, is contested, however (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 36). In any case, political organizations from either end of the political spectrum seem to be among the most active users of online communication. The third hypothesis is thus:

Hypothesis 4: Political orientation of an organization will be related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

Additionally, most interest groups are predominantly active in only one political sector. As mentioned above, differences may be expected between organizations working on different

issues. Groups, for example, mostly occupied with issues such as environmental policy may be more active in implementing online communication tools as opposed to those concerned with retirement provisions. It is thus hypothesised that online communication is also dependent on the target audiences an organizations plans to reach via these tools:

Hypothesis 5: The political sector an organization is predominantly active in will be related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

Among the organizational incentives explaining online activities of political organizations, the status of groups has also been considered to be important (Ward & Gibson, 2009, p. 37). Organizations which lack sufficient exposure from the traditional media could rely more heavily on online communication, in order to make themselves heard. For larger, well-established organizations online communication may play a less important role, as they are simply not as dependent on these forms of communication. They receive media attention primarily because of their organizational status in the political process and in the media arena and are therefore able to attain their organizational goals with other communicational strategies. The fifth hypothesis is thus:

Hypothesis 6: The status of an organization in the political sector an organization is active in will be negatively related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

Online communication still represents a somewhat new form of communication. For young, only recently established organizations, online communication can be seen as a more "natural" channel, while older organizations may have to overcome bigger internal structural obstacles to implement these new technologies (Ward & Gibson, 2009, pp. 36-37). Younger organizations thus may make more extensive use of online communication than older organizations. The older an organization is the less online communication is used:

Hypothesis 7: The organizational age of an organization will be negatively related with the organization's online communication repertoire.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

The total number of interest groups which are engaged in the influence production process and politically active in Switzerland, is unclear and constantly changing (*key words*: interest groups as tourists, political hibernation, policy amateurs). Hence, constructing a sample incorporating political interest groups is a very challenging undertaking. Moreover, there is no official register which lists all politically active interest groups. The interest groups landscape is so heterogeneous and diverse, that the simple counting of organizations is of no avail.

Taking into account several methodological trade-offs, the most valid method of constructing a sample seemed to combine various registers or directories of interest groups publicly available (Wonka, Baumgartner, Mahoney, & Berkhout, 2010) in Switzerland, to include as many organizations as possible in the sample. As every one of these directories has its advantages and disadvantages, the bias of each was tried to be kept to a minimum by the combination of the different registers. As a definition of which lists to choose, all registers and directories of political interest groups were selected and included that were available at governmental departments and parliaments. The bias of these registers, which sometime rely on self-registration of the respective interest group, was tried to compensate with the inclusion of commercial sources on actors politically active in the respective country. As a starting point, the commercial register “Publicus”, a so called “directory” of public life in Switzerland, was selected. These entries were complemented with another commercial database available online ([www.verbaende.ch](http://www.verbaende.ch)), which is based on self-registration. Additionally, the Swiss parliament provides a number of useful data sources: The accreditation register lists the persons which are admitted to the lobby of the parliamentary building in Berne – every member of the Swiss parliament has the right to give away two passes which secure entry to this otherwise inaccessible area. The biggest share of these free passes is given to representatives of interest groups who try to enter in direct contact with the elected representatives in the lobby of the parliament. Furthermore, every member of the Swiss parliament has to declare for which other organizations he or she is active – as Swiss politicians are almost never professionals and often still work part-time. Hence, this register of interests provides a large number of companies, which are excluded from the survey, but also a considerable list of politically active interest groups. Furthermore, all interest groups contacted by the respective governmental department in the consultation on Swiss legislation, from the years 2010 to 2011 were included in the sample. In a final step, the database created by Wonka et al. (2010) for European interest groups and the interest groups listed in the register of interest representatives of the EU domiciled in Switzerland were added.

#### *Data-collection and measurement*

Each of the directories was then coded according to a specifically developed code book to include only the organizations matching the above mentioned definition of political interest groups. Via research on an organization’s website, the email address of the person in charge of Public Relations or communications was tried to identify, or, alternatively, the organization’s general email address was collected. Duplicate entries were consecutively deleted and excluded from the sample (Wonka et al., 2010). These processes led to a database listing entries of 2475 politically active interest groups in Switzerland.

The email addresses collected in the steps described above served as the starting point for the mailing out of a quantitative survey using a questionnaire available online. 985 completed questionnaires from the 2475 organizations addressed were obtained by the end of the field phase (Response rate: 40%). The chief interest in interest groups which are politically active led to a further reduction of the sample, as organisations which stated in the questionnaire that they are “never” politically active were excluded from any further analysis. This resulted in a final sample of 887 organisations in Switzerland.

### *Independent variables*

The independent variables mentioned in hypotheses 1 through 5 were measured directly by asking the respondents for the corresponding organizational figures or assessments, respectively. For the first hypothesis, participants were asked to indicate how many employees work for the organization in total. The respondents were able to enter the figures in employment percentages, to ensure comparability across different organizations: One full-time equivalent (FTE) therefore equals a value of 100 (%). Financial resources available in an organization were measured by directly asking for the approximate overall annual budget available to the organization. Participants were also asked to enter the number of individual members active in the respective organization. To adjust for the skewed distribution of these three variables, they were transformed by taking the logarithm (see also Nah & Saxton, 2012, p. 301). For the political orientation of a political interest group, the organizations could indicate their position on a scale from -50 (left) to +50 (right). These values were later recoded to range from 0 (left) to 100 (right) ( $M = 50.43$ ,  $SD = 21.7$ ,  $SE = .91$ ). Similarly, the selection of the political sector an organization is predominantly active in was based on the self-assessment of the participants. The available answering options included the sectors business and work ( $n = 319$ , 36%), social life ( $n = 43$ , 4.8%), health ( $n = 110$ , 12.4%), leisure and relaxation ( $n = 61$ , 6.9%), culture ( $n = 41$ , 4.6%), education ( $n = 89$ , 10%), science ( $n = 35$ , 3.9%), religion/ideology ( $n = 16$ , 1.8%), political issues ( $n = 99$ , 11.2%), and environmental issues ( $n = 47$ , 5.3%). The option “other” was also added ( $n = 3$ , 0.3%; no answer:  $n = 24$ , 2.7%). The status was measured by asking if an organization was a leading political interest group in its respective sector. Respondents could answer on a five-point-scale, ranging from 1 (“does not apply at all”) to 5 (“applies completely”) ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $SE = .04$ ). In the questionnaire, it was also asked for the year in which an organization was founded. By subtracting the current year (2013), the age of an organization resulted ( $M = 59.05$ ,  $SD = 48.06$ ,  $SE = 1.68$ ).

### *Dependent variables*

A number of instruments and activities typically employed by political interest groups were directly measured by asking if a group used the respective instrument or activity – or not.

Table 1 summarizes the instruments and activities for which data was collected and indicates the percentage of organizations using or pursuing the respective tool or activity. It thus gives an overview of the (external) communication repertoire of political interest groups in Switzerland.

Table 1: Instruments and activities used by political interest groups in Switzerland for their external communication

<b>Communication repertoire of political interest groups in Switzerland</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Operating and maintaining a website	812	91.54
Direct contact with political decision-makers (e.g. personal or telephone contact)	722	81.40
Issuing informative material (brochures, flyers, publications etc.)	722	81.40
Sending out press releases	665	74.97
Directly approaching journalists (e.g. personally or by telephone)	578	65.16
Holding events for special target groups (e.g. for scientists, young people)	534	60.20
Sending out a newsletter by email	521	58.74
Holding public events (e.g. panel discussions)	426	48.03
Organising press conferences	360	40.59
Commissioning or carrying out own studies	354	39.91
Holding events with direct contacts to citizens (e.g. campaigning at a booth)	242	27.28
Production and publication of advertising material	237	26.72
Activities in internet social networks (e.g. Facebook, YouTube)	196	22.10
Organisation of public demonstrations and protests	95	10.71
Operating and maintaining a Twitter account	67	7.55

n = 887

### *Analytical techniques*

Because all of the dependent variables investigated in the main research question are binary categorical variables (a tool is either employed, or not employed), the use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression would result in biased, inefficient and inconsistent parameter estimates (Nah & Saxton, 2012, p. 303). Hence, to estimate the different models, logit regressions were employed.

## **Results**

Table 2 indicates the results from the different regression models calculated for the online communication instruments of major interest with regard to the research question: sending out a newsletter per email, operating and maintaining a website, activities in internet social networks (e.g. Facebook, YouTube), and operating and maintaining a Twitter account. Not all

regression models obtained significant chi-squared values, with pseudo- $R^2$  values between .02 and .12.

Findings are summarized by hypothesis in order. First, Hypothesis 1, which had predicted a positive relationship between the personnel resources an organization is able to deploy, received no support for all of the online communication instruments surveyed. The variable obtained no significance in all of the calculated models.

Hypothesis 2 postulated a positive relationship between an organization's financial resources and the use of the different online communication instruments. The variable obtained a positive and significant coefficient explaining the use of a newsletter, a website and social networks, but no significant coefficient in the model explaining the use of Twitter. For all of the other online instruments, financially powerful organizations are more likely to adopt these online communication tools. The use of Twitter cannot be explained with the organizational capacity of an organization, however.

The coefficients on the measure of the number of members in an organization were significant for all four online communication instruments. However, Hypothesis 3 stated a positive relationship between an organization's size in terms of members and the use of the different communication instruments. But this assumption can only be confirmed with regard to the adoption of social network sites (e.g. Facebook or YouTube) and Twitter. For sending out a newsletter or operating and maintaining a website, the coefficient on the measures of members was negative, indicating that these tools are more likely to be used by organizations with rather few members.

Table 2: Analyses of online communication adoption by political interest groups in Switzerland

	Newsletter		Website			Social network sites			Twitter			
	Model 1	Model 2	Full	Model 1	Model 2	Full	Model 1	Model 2	Full	Model 1	Model 2	Full
<i>Organizational capacity</i>												
Personnel resources	.09 (.13)		.03 (.18)	.02 (.23)		.19 (.35)	.20 (.17)		.13 (.21)	-.01 (.25)		-.17 (.30)
Financial resources	.53** (.15)		.43* (.21)	.70** (.26)		.36* (.37)	.40* (.18)		.42* (.24)	.28 (.28)		.24 (.37)
Number of members	-.25* (.11)		-.29* (.15)	-.10* (.24)		-.04 (.36)	.18* (.12)		.11 (.15)	.23* (.19)		.27 (.22)
<i>Organizational incentives</i>												
Political orientation		.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)		-.01 (.01)	.01 (.02)		-.02** (.01)	-.02* (.01)		-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Political sector												
Business and work		-	-		-	-		-	-		-	-
Social life		.12 (.47)	-.52 (.67)		-	-		.92 (.49)	.35 (.70)		.39 (.81)	-.19 (1.18)
Health		-.15 (.31)	.24 (.48)		-.19 (0.62)	-.24 (.93)		-.54 (.41)	-.59 (.56)		-.25 (.60)	.27 (.68)
Leisure/relaxation		-.40 (.42)	-1.15 (.74)		.61 (1.07)	-.39 (1.20)		1.14 (.46)	1.22 (.71)		.64 (.68)	.00 (.14)
Culture		.25 (.54)	1.03 (.67)		-	-		.85 (.53)	1.29 (.63)		-.55 (1.09)	-.33 (1.14)
Education		.16 (.35)	1.01 (.61)		.04 (.69)	.49 (1.19)		-.51 (.46)	-.44 (.73)		-1.26 (1.06)	-.53 (1.13)
Science		-.42 (.56)	-.89 (.90)		-.08 (1.09)	-.34 (1.27)		-1.23 (1.06)	-		.09 (1.08)	-
Religion/ideology		-.59 (.77)	-.46 (1.24)		-1.29 (.93)	-.49 (1.53)		.70 (.87)	-		-	-
Political issues		.46 (.31)	1.24* (.51)		-.14 (.56)	1.05* (1.20)		1.13** (.32)	.77* (.47)		1.33** (.41)	.47 (.66)
Environment		.10 (.40)	.58 (.50)		-	-		.43 (.42)	.35 (.51)		.36 (.61)	-.54 (.85)
Status	.31** (.09)		.34* (.15)		.48* (.19)	.34 (.32)		.45** (.12)	.26 (.17)		.49** (.18)	.42 (.27)
Age	.00 (.00)		.00 (.00)		.00 (.00)	.00 (.01)		.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)		.00 (.00)	-.01 (.01)
n	401	401	253	401	441	198	401	518	242	401	510	242
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.03	.10	.06	.05	.10	.05	.12	.12	.02	.09	.08
Log likelihood	-261.96	-335.02	-152.61	-85.52	-104.03	-43.33	-211.80	-258.59	-131.93	-111.42	-141.01	-72.25
Model Significance ( $\chi^2$ )	24.42**	20.01*	35.16**	10.66*	11.13	9.27	24.63**	68.67**	35.75**	5.21	27.03**	11.97

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients shown for all models, with standard errors in parentheses. <sup>+</sup> $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

For the hypotheses related to the organizational incentives of using online communication, some hypotheses can clearly be rejected, while others receive – limited – support. Hypothesis 4 postulated that the political orientation of an organization will be related with the use of online communication. The coefficients of this measure, however, are only significant in explaining the use of social network sites. The data suggest that organizations of the right of the political spectrum are less likely to adopt this instrument. Organizations of the left of the political spectrum are hence more likely to engage on platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. As these tools offer at least the potential for dialogue and mutual exchange, rather leftist organizations seem to make more use of these distinctive features. The point that political organizations embraced the Net for the possibility of free speech may be of lower importance in these arenas, as both networks have a number of legal rules in order to protect their users from potentially harmful content (Wassmer & Jarren, 2012).

With regard to hypothesis 5, dealing with the political sector an organization is predominantly active in and the organization's online communication yielded mixed support. When adding the variables of the organizational capacity subset to the model, interest groups which declared they are primarily dealing with political issues were more likely to send out a newsletter and operate and maintain a website. For activities in social networks online and Twitter, significant coefficients for groups declaring political issues as their core business were obtained in the organizational incentives model (Model 2). All in all, politically active interest groups that are not active in one of the other sectors, but try directly to engage in politics seem more likely to use online communication.

The coefficients for the measure of an organization's status obtained significance were significant in the models incorporating the organizational incentives variables for all online communication tools. However, the hypothesis has to be rejected, as the coefficients point in the opposite direction than formulated in Hypothesis 6. Organizations which stated that they play a leading role in their respective field are also more likely to adopt the different online communication technologies.

Hypothesis 7, which posited that an organization's age is negatively related with its use of online communication, received no support at all. The adoption of newsletter, websites, social network activities or Twitter cannot be explained with the year an organization was founded in.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

In this paper, the adoption of different online communication tools by political online groups in Switzerland was tried to explain. Theoretically, the conceptual design of (online) communication repertoires was used, in order to account for the fact that the instruments a



political interest group employs are dependent on characteristic factors found either inside or outside of a given organization. However, as pointed out by Bimber et al. (2009) and Chadwick (2007), online communication can enhance variation. No two groups are the same and a comparison is thus difficult. As the interest group universe itself is by nature very heterogeneous and diverse, the identification of clear adoption patterns is difficult. Under the term “interest group”, a variety of different “organisational animals” (Jordan et al., 2004, p. 196) is subsumed, each with its history, position in the political systems and resources potentially affecting the decision whether to adopt a specific tool of online communication. It is important to note “that all groups are not the same and that underlying their policy function is a heterogeneous array of organisational and representative functions” (Jordan et al., 2004, p. 206).

With regard to the question asked at the outset of this paper, the answer is quite clear: There is only little support for the assumption that online communication is rather used by smaller, financially weak, fringe organizations. This may have been the case in the beginning, but as the diffusion of online communication in general has progressed, these traces have nearly vanished. This is especially striking with regard to the explanatory power of an organization's age. Online communication may have become mainstream, in the meantime, and even older organizations have jumped the bandwagon and adopted online communication tools to realize their organizational goals. It could even be that online communication is of greater importance for these organizations, as it could be seen as a tool to appear as a modern organization and to attract younger members and supporters, as some of the older organizations may have to deal with aging constituencies.

In terms of data collection, a systematic analysis of the missing values on some variables could help to further assess the quality of the findings and to detect possible systematic missing values, especially with regard to the sensitive information asked for in the online survey, such as budget or political orientation. These missing values accumulated to reduce the number of organizations to be included in each of the regression models drastically. With regard to the use of a website, the explanatory power of the regression analysis was somewhat limited, due to the sampling procedure described above. In order to collect an email address to which the invitation to the questionnaire could be sent to, an organization's website was consulted in most of the cases. This resulted, technically, in a sample that includes practically only organizations with a web presence. The variance for this variable was therefore limited from the start. The rather low pseudo- $R^2$  values indicate further, that there may be some other independent variables, which are helpful in explaining the adoption of online communication and which were not included in the models discussed in this paper.



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